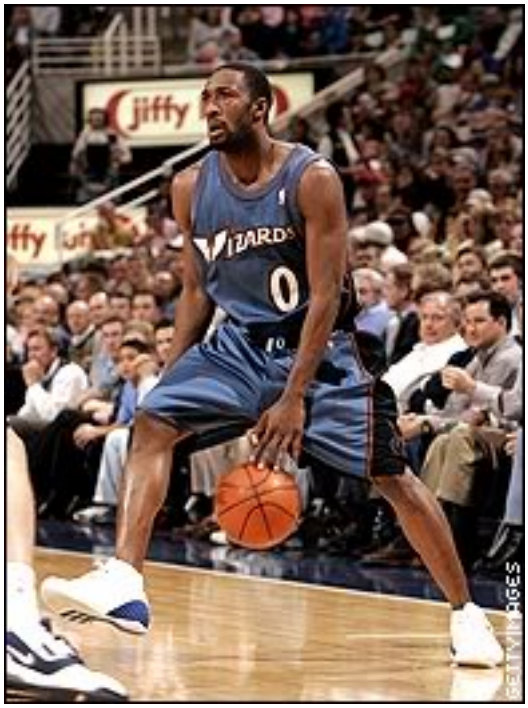

Much has been made of the fact that this is the Cavaliers first playoff appearance in eight years. But little has been said about the fact that this is the thirty year anniversary of the Cavs first ever playoff appearance … which went on to be known as “The Miracle of Richfield”. The Cavs defeated the Washington Bullets in a thrilling seven game series before succumbing to the Celtics in the Eastern Finals, thanks mostly due to injuries to Jim Chones and others.

The two franchises haven’t met in the post-season since. And while Washington has a new nickname, and Gilbert Arenas and Antawn Jamison instead of Elvin Hayes and Wes Unseld, this series has the makings to be just as exciting, and is easily the most anticipated first round match-up in this years NBA Playoffs.

The Wizards qualified as the #5 seed last season as well, and faced the #4 seeded Chicago Bulls. After losing the first two games in Chicago, the Wizards came back to win four straight and win the series. They were promptly swept by the Heat in the second round. It was the Wizards first playoff appearance in eight years, and their first playoff win in seventeen years.

It's been a strange season for the Wizards. They started 5-1, then dropped 17 of their next 25 games to fall to 13-18. They then won 13 of 18 to get things to 26-23, and have pretty much played .500 ball since. It should be noted that they recently lost five straight games (before winning the last three to secure the five seed) in which they were missing Caron Butler, and likely would have finished better than 42-40 had he not gone down.

They are coached by Eddie Jordan, who is generally regarded as one of the best young coaches in the game. Jordan was born and raised in D.C., and has done what Michael Jordan was unable to do: restore respectability to the Washington basketball franchise. This is Jordan's third year as head man of the Wizards.

Let's take a closer look at the Cavs first round playoff opponent …

ON THE SURFACE

The Wizards are the third highest scoring team in the NBA at 101.7 points per game. They like to get out and run, taking advantage of their length, athleticism, and ability to get to the free throw line. Washington attempted the second most free throws in the league this season, hitting 76% of them. This explains how the Wizards managed to average almost 102 points per game despite ranking 21st in the NBA in field goal percentage at 44.7%. They were 26th

in the league in assists, due mostly to how many shots Arenas creates for himself on drives to the basket. And the Wizards ranked right in the middle of the pack in both three point attempts and three point percentage.

While they are far from impressive defensively, the Wizards were third in the league in steals, led by Gilbert Arenas and Caron Butler, who were 3rd and 13th respectively in the league in that department. They gamble, they like to take chances in the passing lane … and they like to get out and run. Despite not being overly physical, they ranked 14th in the league in rebounding, which is more just a byproduct of how many shots they take. The Wizards are more of a finesse team, and like the Cavs, do not have a true physical presence/intimidator down low.

Washington was much better at home this

season, going 25-16 at the Verizon Center and 17-24 on the road. The Wizards averaged 3.5 less points per game on the road, shoot more threes, and don't get to the line as much.

THE BIG THREE

Gilbert Arenas, Antawn Jamison, and Caron Butler were the highest scoring trio in all of basketball this season, combining for 67 points a game, and 66% of the total offensive production of the team.

Arenas is one of the top players in all of basketball, and was a match-up nightmare for the Cavs this season when we were missing Larry Hughes. Arenas

was fourth in the league in scoring at 29.3 points per game. He was third in the league in steals, and also averaged 6.1 assists per game. Arenas was more of a pure point guard in college at Arizona, and early on in his NBA career … but has developed into a well-oiled scoring machine in the nation's capital. He is an excellent ball handler and distributor, shot over 37% from three, and was one of just six players in the league to average 10+ free throw attempts per contest. He's very hard to stop from driving to the paint, and he made 82% of his free throw attempts this season.

Jamison had perhaps his best overall season in 2005-2006 after coming back

from knee problems that plagued him late last year. He averaged 20.4 points and a career high 9.3 rebounds. And he added a new weapon to his arsenal, knocking down 148 three pointers, shooting 39.4% from behind the arc. Jamison played in all 82 games, and registered 35 double-doubles.

Butler had a breakout season in this, his fourth year in the league. He was stolen away from the Lakers for Kwame Brown, and went on to average career highs in points (17.6), rebounds (6.1), field goal percentage (42%), three point percentage (34%), and free throw percentage (87%). He also averaged 1.7 steals per game, which was amongst the league leaders. Butler was coming

off the bench to start the season, and the Wizards went 30-21 in games Butler started over the final two thirds of the season. His numbers got even better in the second half of the season, and the Wizards looked lost without him when he went down for five games in early to mid April.

THE REST OF THE TEAM

Not too much to get excited about, though Antonio Daniels has been very solid for them in the second half of the season playing the point, averaging about 15 points and 5

assists since the All-Star break. Daniels comes off the bench, but plays starters minutes.

Brendan Haywood mans the middle, and averaged 7 points and 6 rebounds in 24 minutes a night this season.

The other starter is former Indiana Hoosier Jared Jeffries, who plays about 25 minutes a night, averaging 6 points, 5 rebounds, and 2 assists.

Jeffries will more than likely be the one trying to slow down LeBron James, which he did a decent job doing during the regular season.

The Wizards have only been playing two guys off their bench as they made their push for the five seed. Daniels and Michael Ruffin. Ruffin is a 6’8 bruiser, with little to no offensive skills. Their 8th and 9th guys are Etan Thomas (has some back problems right now) and Billy

Thomas, both of who have seen little to no playing time as of late as Eddie Jordan has settled into a seven man rotation. I'd be surprised if that changed in the post-season, where most teams shorten their benches.

THE FOUR TIMES WE PLAYED THEM THIS YEAR

A closer look at the four games between these two

teams this year reveals that entirely too much stock is being put into the Wizards 3-1 record in these contests.

In the first game on November 15th at The Q, a fully healthy Cavs team laid waste to the Wizards by a 114-99 count. Behind LeBron James 37 points, the Cavs busted the game open in the second half and coasted to a comfortable win. In his first

game against his old team, Larry Hughes held former teammate Gilbert Arenas in check. Arenas finished with just 18 points on 4-17 shooting.

They then played twice in February, and in both games the Cavs were without Larry Hughes and Flip Murray. We actually

had Flip for the second one, but it was one of his first games here and he played just 24 minutes.

In the first one, Arenas took out his frustration on us over not being initially named to the All-Star team. Arenas dropped 32 points and 10 assists on us in a 101-89 win in Washington.

Zydrunas Ilgauskas was ejected for fighting with Brendan Haywood. And LeBron had one of his worst nights as a pro, scoring just 18 points on 6-23 shooting.

Two weeks later, the teams met in Cleveland, and this was the infamous game where LeBron James was booed by the home fans

after going 0-8 from the field and 4-12 from the line in the final quarter of a 102-94 loss. The Wizard Big Three combined for 75 points in a 102-94 Washington win.

In the teams final match-up, last Sunday, the Cavs rested starters, fell behind big early … and then made a fourth quarter comeback

that fell short. Washington won 104-92.

MY THOUGHTS

I was very salty when the Cavs fell apart down the stretch last season and missed the playoffs. Not because they had a chance to go anywhere, or

maybe even win a game. It was because I knew they'd be there this year, and that playoff experience in this league is so incredibly valuable.

The Cavs have a rookie head coach. Only Eric Snow and Damon Jones have any real playoff

experience. They are playing a team that took three of four from them in the regular season, and won in the first round last year. Clearly, there's a lot to be worried about.

But when healthy, the Cavaliers are simply a better basketball team than

the Wizards. And they have the best player in the league, who has dominated the second halves of basketball games the last two months.

Scarily, I see LeBron raising his level of play in this series. So often this season, LeBron toyed with

teams for three quarters, strictly getting teammates involved before going for their jugular in the fourth quarter. He played two of his worst games of the season versus the Wizards. And the Wizard players can’t stop getting quoted publicly about how happy they are to play the Cavs. Bad idea.

The Cavs also have a size advantage inside, and have Larry Hughes back to check Arenas. I worry more about the damage the Cavs may let Jamison and Butler inflict. We also go legitimately nine deep with Varejao, Jones, Marshall, and Flip all playing the best ball they've played all season right now. The Wizards

are essentially a six man team. How well Mike Brown works the match-ups will have a monstrous effect on this series.

By no means do I see this as an easy series. I think the home teams will dominate, winning the first

five games, with the Cavs either sneaking out a win in Washington in a game six thriller, or taking care of business at home in game seven.